SOCIAL DISTANCE IN CUSTOMER-SERVICE EMPLOYEE ENCOUNTERS: A LUXURY VS. NON-LUXURY COMPARISON

Abstract

Social distance is commonly seen to harm personal relationships across all areas. In the sales context, it is supposed to negatively affect sales-related outcomes. The luxury sales context is especially endangered to have social status distance between its customers and their service employees. However, here it does not seem to disturb the customer relationship management. This paper, therefore, questions the conventional believe that social distance is always harmful for personal relationships. We assume that, when selling luxury brands, social distance between customer and service employee does not necessarily hurt sales-related outcomes and customer relationships. Contrary, a certain degree of social distance might be beneficial for a luxury shopping experience, related consumer behaviors and evaluations. Using an online experiment, this research examines the effects of social status distance between customers and service employees in dependency of the brand context. Results show that social distance negatively affects customer behavior variables in a non-luxury brand context, while these negative effects diminish in a luxury brand context. With these findings, this research sets a starting point for further work on the impact of social distance in the luxury brand context and how this initially negative afflicted condition might be turned into strategic beneficial out-comes for the luxury practice.

Introduction and Objectives

Selling luxury goods has always been related to a personal one-to-one relationship between the customer and the salesperson (Cailleux, Mignot, & Kapferer, 2009). Offering products of high involvement, high quality and high prices, luxury brands used to differentiate themselves further from the mass-market through excellent service quality and personal relationships with the customers. Although massive store openings, brand re-launches and proactive customer recruiting measures in the 1990s allowed luxury brands to grow rapidly, the spirit of personal customer relationships faded into the background during this time (Haupt, 2007). As a result, luxury brands today register significant annual customer attrition rates of up to 90 per cent. Only 10-15 per cent of luxury customers state that they have experienced a personal relationship to a sales associate of any luxury brand (The Luxury Institute, 2011). Only 38 per cent of questioned luxury customers see a better and more personalized service in luxury retail than in non-luxury retail (Edwards & Probst, 2012). Seeing the essence of luxury, the personal customer-salesperson relationship, under threat, the luxury goods industry has initiated a strategic reorientation towards a new concept of customer focus and relationship building. It is, therefore, a major objective of luxury brand managers to replace earlier customer acquisition strategies with measures of customer loyalty and retention (Haupt, 2007).

However, establishing strong and long-term relationships with customers presents a challenge for salespeople, especially in the luxury goods market. Heavy consumers of luxury goods are mainly affluent and very different from their sales counterparts in stores. Socio-economically (income, occupation and education) as well as socio-metrically (influence on, admiration and respect from others), luxury customers and sales associates are very dissimilar to each other. Social dissimilarity is said to inhibit beneficial outcomes of social relationships, such as trust, liking, and felt closeness. Because of this missing closeness, two socially dissimilar individuals perceive social distance between each other. In no other sector of consumer goods, we find such a significant mismatch between customers and salespeople in terms of their social variables, as in the luxury sector. Therefore, here it is especially important to manage social distance between them carefully in order to make luxury customers feel comfortable with their sales associate and to protect the brand from customer attrition.

Sales literature has emphasized the importance of similarity and social closeness between customers and sales associates in order to build and maintain personal customer-salesperson relationships (Kwak & Sojka, 2011). Thus, luxury brands fear to harm numerous desirable performance outcomes related to social closeness, such as perceived service quality, positive attitude towards the brand, purchase intention, sales effectiveness or customer loyalty (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Dion, Easterling, & Miller, 1995; Evans, 1963). In response to the existent social distance between luxury sales associates and their affluent customers, luxury brands have invested in measures to diminish social distance in the customer-salesperson relationship and try to match their salespeople to the luxury clients. However, luxury brand managers are aware that it is utopic to find luxury sales associates, who naturally match their affluent customers in terms of social status, income, or educational background. Therefore, they aim at compensating the social distance between customers and service employee through recruiting, training, and retaining measures.

In a first pretest in a neutral shopping environment, we could confirm this view by showing, that social status distance perceived by the customer harms the customer-service employee relationship. Social distance, here, negatively affected the customer's attitudes toward the

brand and toward the service employee in store and it decreased the customer's purchase intentions for the brand. This accompanies the former negative view of the consequences of social distance for customer relationships in shopping environments. Although luxury brands are mainly distributed through personnel selling in stores, research about success factors for the interpersonal customer relationship is scarce (Wieseke, Alavi, Habel, & Dörfer, 2013). Therefore, this paper focuses on the core of luxury services, the customer relationship, and supports luxury retail managers in their handling of socially distant customers and their satisfaction.

Research Question

Luxury sales associates have to deal with several luxury-specific dimensions. The social dimension, hosting strategies like recruiting, training and retaining of the right service employees, builds the environment for social distance to happen between the customer and the service employee. Although the above mentioned strategies will help to build a profound basis for high-quality service and customer relationship building, we pose the question, how social distance effects customer and social variables in a luxury compared to a non-luxury brand service-encounter and if luxury brands will actually benefit from completely eliminating social distance between customer and service employee. Contrary to previous research, emphasizing the beneficial effects of interpersonal similarity and social closeness, we propose that when it comes to a luxury sales context, dissimilarity and social distance can cause positive effects for the brand and the customer. Therefore, we propose that, differently from a non-luxury selling context, a certain level of social distance between the luxury customer and his sales associate can boost performance measures of the brand (e.g. attitude toward the brand, purchase intention).

In order to frame our proposition, this paper discusses the relevance of personal customer relationships for luxury brands and how dissimilarity and social distance affect this relationship. Furthermore, we empirically test the effect of perceived social distance between customers and service employees within a luxury and non-luxury brand context, showing that in a luxury brand context, the negative effects of social distance diminish. Moreover, in a luxury brand context we can see performance measures of the brand benefiting from social distance between the customer and his sales associate. Therefore, the contribution of this paper is to help luxury brand retailers to understand, what benefits they can achieve by managing social distances between their customers and service employees successfully. Realizing what social needs the customer may seek to be satisfied within the service encounter and how to train service people adequately to respond to them, is key for reaching their desired outcome: a high-quality, long-term customer relationship.

Conceptual Framework / Literature Review /Research Model

A personal customer-salesperson relationship describes the interpersonal bonds that develop between a customer and a salesperson through an ongoing series of interactions in a retail environment (Herhausen, Schögel, & Schulten, 2012; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Scholars as well as practitioners have realized the attractiveness and relevance of connecting personally with customers, because activities connected with establishing, developing, and maintaining long-term relationships are crucial drivers of a luxury brand's competitive advantage (Weitz & Bradford, 1999). The popularity of the concept of personal customer-salesperson relationships stems, in part, from the assumption that these relationships yield positive

outcomes for the brand's performances (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999). Indeed, the advantages of a long-term customer-salesperson relationship for the brand are evident: personal relationships are not only assumed to increase customer satisfaction, loyalty, and the amount of favorable word-of-mouth, they also increase customers' brand recommendations and repurchase intentions (Berry & Parasuraman, 2005; Griffin, 2002). Furthermore, brands profit in terms of reduced marketing costs, simplified access to the customer, improved acquisition of new potential clients, customer retention and profitability (Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Smit, Bronner, & Tolboom, 2007). Customers receive benefits from interpersonal relationships with sales associates, which serve to fill many important human needs (Reynolds & Beatty, 1999).

Brands offering products of high involvement have a stronger focus on relationship marketing than brands selling products of low involvement. Luxury brands offer products of high involvement and, therefore, need to build personal relationships with their customers (Kim, Kim, & Johnson, 2010). By doing so, luxury brands are able to have perfect control of their products, service, image, and prices but, moreover, they are able to establish an affective relationship between the brand and the customer. An affective relationship is vital for luxury brands, since it reduces the need for pure sales and emphasizes the integral part of luxury service. The development of luxury customer-salesperson relationships and the focus on exceptional service represents the major distinction between the selling of luxury and non-luxury products back in history as well as today (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009a).

Based on these findings, sales literature has emphasized the importance of customer-salesperson similarity in order to establish long-term selling relationships (Kwak & Sojka, 2011). First studied by Evans (1963), researchers have continued to investigate the effects of similarity between buyers and sellers. Numerous dimensions such as attitudes, personality traits or appearances (age, race, nationality) have been subject of these studies. Findings of this research showed that the perceived similarity between customers and salespeople increases the level of trust, improves sales performances (Dion et al., 1995) and is positively related to sales effectiveness (Evans, 1963). Moreover, the perceived similarity between buyer and seller influences the relationship satisfaction of the customer (Crosby et al., 1990). This in mind, it becomes evident, that customer-salesperson similarity is essential for a successful and long-lasting relationship between buyer and salesperson. As a result, brand managers started early hiring new sales candidates, whose basic characteristics match the attributes of the target customers, they are mostly dealing with (Churchill, Collins, & Strang, 1975).

Luxury retailing represents a special case, when it comes to the social match between customer and salesperson. A major specificity in selling luxury is the luxury customer: heavy users of luxury are mainly wealthy. A global survey for frequent luxury purchasers in Europe has shown that 61 per cent of these so called "heavy users" record higher incomes (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Consumers of luxury goods can be grouped into three basic annual income tiers: over €100,000 (top-tier), €50,000-100,000 (mid-tier), and below €50,000 (low-tier). Whereas low-tier and mid-tier luxury consumers primarily acquire luxury goods via department and outlet stores or brand and shopping websites, the top-tier consumers prefer to shop directly in a specialty or brand boutique (McKinsey & Company, 2011). Considering that top-tier luxury consumers are the dominant customer group in-store shows that luxury salespeople deal with clients of high income and high socio-economic status. Socio-economic status describes the combination of an economical and sociological measure of an individual's or family's economic and social position in relation to others. Conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group, it can be typically broken into three broad

categories: high, middle and low socio-economic status (American Psychological Association's Socioeconomic Status Office). With an average annual income of around US $26,000 in the luxury sector in the U.S. (United States Department of Labor, 2013), salespeople, luxury salespeople included, normally represent middle to low socio-economic status and, therefore, are far away from their client's financial power.

In no other sector of consumer goods, we find such a mismatch between the salesperson's and the customer's socio-economic status as in luxury. The increasing importance of personal customer-salesperson relationships in luxury retail, while facing the social distance between customers and sales associates, poses a challenge to the management of luxury brands and talents. Questions that arise from these circumstances are: what is social distance and how does it arise in a luxury context? What are the consequences of perceived social distance for the customer and the brand and how can luxury brands benefit from social distance? In order to answer these questions, the following paragraphs will conceptually explain the concepts of social status, similarity and social distance.

Status, in its conventional meaning, refers to a person's position in society (Xavier Drèze & Joseph C. Nunes, 2009). Statuses can be hierarchically ranked, depending on their interrelated concepts of prestige, distribution of scarce sources and opportunities to acquire them and, last but not least, power. A status hierarchy represents a rank order of individuals or groups of individuals according to the amount of these characteristics, evaluated by others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Socio-economic status is an important structural basis for the feeling of being powerful or powerless (Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012). Since status reflects access to and control over economic resources, and power extracts from this resources, status and power go hand in hand together (Henry & Caldwell, 2008). Individuals with a lower socio-economic status, most often, have less access and control over resources than those high in socio-economic status, occupy subordinate business roles and feel powerless (Dubois, Laurent, & Czellar, 2001). Furthermore, the feeling of powerlessness is often accompanied by the actual loss of control over the own behavior or actions and less access to physical or social rewards (Derek D. Rucker & Adam D. Galinsky, 2008). Low-power individuals show greater dependence on others, while high-power individuals, in contrast, show higher levels of self-importance (Rucker et al., 2012). This shows that status can foster agentic versus communal orientations depending on the perceived level of personal power.

Experiencing a low level of power is an aversive state, which individuals will try to leave and compensate (Derek D. Rucker & Adam D. Galinsky, 2008). Given that high status is a strongly related of power (Henry & Caldwell, 2008), obtaining or, at least, demonstrating high status is a strategy to regain power. Status-related consumer products, such as luxury goods, represent one's means to demonstrate status and, thus, power. Experiencing low levels of status and power, individuals might acquire products that signal status to others as evidence for their affluence and willingness to pay exceptionally high prices for luxury goods (Rucker et al., 2012). Consumption, designed to signal one's social status and power, referred to here as status consumption (Bourdieu, 1984; Veblen, 1899), has been defined as "the motivational process, by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through the conspicuous consumption of consumer products, that confer and symbolize status, both for the individual and surrounding significant others" (Eastman, Goldsmith, & Flynn, 1999, p. 42). The economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1899) argues that status can not only be assured by the accumulation of wealth. Moreover, he argues that it is the evidence of wealth and wasteful behavior (i.e. conspicuous consumption), which confers status and power. Only if

other people recognize the luxury possessions an individual publicly displays as his own, his social status will be demonstrated.

The idea that similar others are being perceived as socially closer to oneself than dissimilar others leads to the assumption that interpersonal similarity is a form of social distance (Liviatan, Trope, & Liberman, 2008). Luxury customers have a certain financial power and this experience of power and dissimilarity to others increases social distance to others. Those, who do not belong to the most affluent luxury customers, but still spend their money on luxury goods, might want to attain status and power by consuming luxury. This "powerless-induced compensatory model of consumption proposes that the acquisition of status can increase one's felt sense of power" (Rucker et al., 2012, p. 360). The perceived promise of luxury goods to increase the consumer's social status builds on the image and origin of luxury itself. In a luxury brand store, we do not only find social distance in terms of socio-economic status and power, we further find psychological distance in form of social stratification. Serving as a social marker, luxury creates social stratification. Luxury fulfills the symbolic desire to belong to the superior class in society and its goods serve as social signifiers for this class (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009b). Since money itself is not enough to measure taste and status, luxury brands encode social distinction and convert the mere state of being wealthy into social stratification and, thus, social distance (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009b). Applied to the sales context and the establishment of personal relationships in luxury retail, variables such as social class, status, power, or education represent the major dissimilarities between customer and salesperson. This dissimilarity results from social differences between the status, power, education and income of luxury customers and salespeople.

As previous research and our own pretest show, status distance between customer and service employee negatively affects their social interaction. Since the service employee represents the brand and its values in the front line in store, the relationship with the service employee also represents the relationship with the brand (Yim, Tse, & Chan, 2008). Therefore, perceived social distance to the service employee affects the customer's attitude toward the brand. Luxury brands tend to favor positive customer attitudes because they represent cosmopolitanism, good quality, and high social status. Customers care about these factors and like to be associated with them (Wang, Chow, Cheris W. C., & Luk, 2013). Moreover, luxury brands have a powerful positive influence of prior brand exposure (Wang et al., 2013), which also creates strong and resistible status-related brand attitudes in the customer's mind. Therefore, we assume that the luxury brand image can inhibit the negative effects of perceived social distance, since luxury symbolizes status and distinctiveness. Non-luxury brands do not have this strong statu-related presetting in the customer's mind and, therefore, social distance here shows stronger impact on customer's attitudes than in a luxury brand context. Consequently, we hypothesize:

H1: In a non-luxury brand context, social distance between customer and service-employee will negatively affect customer behavior variables, while social closeness will show positive effects on them.

H2: In a luxury brand context, social distance between customer and service-employee will positively affect customer behavior variables, while social closeness will show negative effects on them.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model
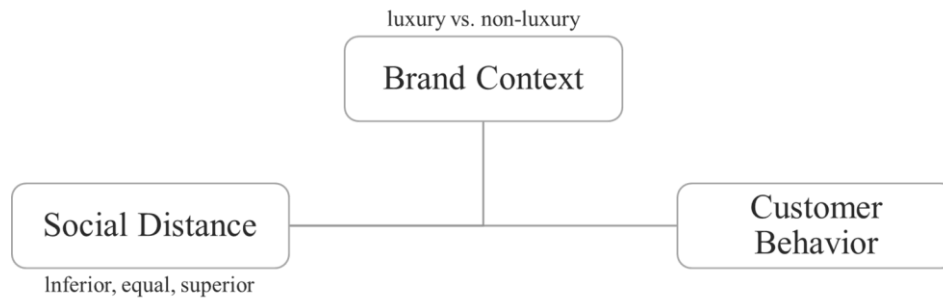
Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment using a 3 (social distance: customer is inferior, equal, superior) x 2 (luxury vs. non-luxury brand scenario) between-subjects design. A total of 304 participants took part in the online experiment via the crowdsourcing online platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and received 0.50 USD for their participation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the six experimental conditions. Participants were first provided with a priming scenario, in which they were given an either high or low social status. Next to this prime the participants were confronted with a shopping scenario and a sales talk with a service employee holding also either a high or a low social status. The primed social statuses included socio-economic as well socio-metric characteristics (Kraus et al., 2010; Kraus et al., 2012). The combinations of status primes lead to three outcomes for social distance: a) the customer felt to be status superior to the employee (positive status distance), b) he felt to be status equal with the employee (no status distance) or, c) he felt to be status inferior to the employee (negative status distance).The shopping scenarios, placed in a watch store, differentiated by the description of either a luxury or a non-luxury watch brand. After reading the priming and the scenario, participants indicated their answers concerning different brand performance measures (purchase intention, anticipated brand loyalty, purchase as a gift intention, willingness to buy and positive word of mouth) and answered manipulation checks using various scales.

Items for customer's purchase intention were adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) and Voorhees, Brady, and Horowitz (2006). Anticipated brand loyalty was measured with the self-created item "I could imagine buying a wristwatch from (the brand) in the future, even if competitive brands offer cheaper prices." Willingness to pay was measured with items adapted from Macintosh and Lockshin (1997). We assessed the participant's degree of positive word of mouth with items from Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst (2005) and his intention to purchase the product as a gift with items from Dubois and Paternault (1995). Constructs were measured on a seven-point Likert-type scale. The manipulation check for the perceived social distance between the customer and the service employee based on items concerning the perceived similarity between customer and service employee by Tidwell and

Eastwick (2012), a self-created bipolar measure for perceived status differences, a self-created measure for perceived social status of the customer himself and the service employee, as well as a social ladder measure to rank the customer's own perceived social status and the social status of the service employee by Kraus, Tan, and Tannenbaum (2013). Furthermore, the inclusion of the self scale by Aron, Aron, and Smollan (1992) came to use in order to measure the perceived social closeness respectively distance (see Table with items attached to Appendix).

Findings

We analyzed data using an ANOVA. As for the test of the social status and social distance primes, we used the experimental conditions as the independent variable and the manipulation-check questions as dependent variable. These analyses offered significant results, showing that participants in a high status prime condition indicated to have a significant higher status than participants in the low status prime condition. The same holds true for the prime of the service employee's status. These successful primes of the customer's and the service employee's social status resulted in the intended social status distance or closeness in the six conditions.

To test our hypotheses, we tested the effect of social status distance on the customer's purchase intention. Results show that in the non-luxury brand context, perceived social distance negatively affects the customer's purchase intention. Participants who felt socially distant indicated a significant worse purchase intention ($M_{inferior} = 3.20$; $M_{superior} = 4.35$) than participants who felt socially close to the service employee ($M_{equal} = 4.35$) ($F (2, 155) = 6.984$, $p = .001$). Contrary, in a luxury brand context, perceived social distance positively affected purchase intention. Participants who felt socially distant ($M_{inferior} = 4.07$; $M_{superior} = 3.68$) showed a significantly higher purchase intention than participants who felt socially close ($M_{equal} = 3.04$) ($F (2, 125) = 3.089$, $p = .049$).

Similar effects were found for anticipated brand loyalty. Participants in the non-luxury brand context, who felt socially distant indicated a significant worse anticipated brand loyalty ($M_{inferior} = 2.57$; $M_{superior} = 3.53$) than participants who felt socially close to the service employee ($M_{equal} = 3.66$) ($F (2, 155) = 7.494$, $p = .001$). Contrary, in a luxury brand context, perceived social distance positively affected anticipated brand loyalty. Participants who felt socially distant ($M_{inferior} = 3.49$; $M_{superior} = 3.41$) showed a significantly higher anticipated brand loyalty than participants who felt socially close ($M_{equal} = 2.62$) ($F (2, 125) = 3.197$, $p = .045$).

For the dependent variable to purchase the product as a gift, perceived social distance showed similar, albeit not directly the same results. In the non-luxury brand context, the effects of perceived social distance increased linearly with the increase of the customer's social status ($M_{inferior} = 3.06$; $M_{equal} = 3.88$; $M_{superior} = 4.13$) ($F (2, 155) = 4.343$, $p = .015$). However, in the luxury brand context, we found again the positive effect of social distance on the dependent variable. Participants who felt socially distant ($M_{inferior} = 4.11$; $M_{superior} = 4.15$) showed a significantly higher intention to purchase the product as a gift, than participants who felt socially close ($M_{equal} = 3.02$) ($F (2, 125) = 4.806$, $p = .010$).

Similar results were found for the dependent variable willingness to buy. In the non-luxury brand context, the effects of perceived social distance increased linearly with the increase of

the customer's social status ($M_{inferior}$ = 3.17; M_{equal} = 4.09; $M_{superior}$ = 4.24) (F (2, 155) = 5.753, p = .004). In the luxury brand context, we found again the positive effect of social distance on the dependent variable. Participants who felt socially distant ($M_{inferior}$ = 3.52; $M_{superior}$ = 3.46) showed a significantly higher willingness to buy than participants who felt socially close (M_{equal} = 2.47) (F (2, 125) = 4.663, p = .011).

The dependent variable positive word-of-mouth showed similar findings for the effect of perceived social distance. In the non-luxury brand context, the effects of perceived social distance increased linearly with the increase of the customer's social status ($M_{inferior}$ = 3.03; M_{equal} = 4.04; $M_{superior}$ = 4.31) (F (2, 155) = 9.661, p = .001). In the luxury brand context, we found again the positive effect of social distance on the dependent variable. Participants who felt socially distant ($M_{inferior}$ = 4.19; $M_{superior}$ = 4.04) showed significantly more positive word-of-mouth than participants who felt socially close (M_{equal} = 3.27) (F (2, 125) = 3.721, p = .027).

Based on these findings, we can partially confirm hypothesis H1 and fully confirm hypothesis H2. In a non-luxury brand context, social distance between customer and service-employee negatively affects the customer's purchase intention and anticipated brand loyalty. Social closeness showed positive effects here. However, for the dependent variables purchase as a gift, willingness to buy and positive word-of-mouth, the values increase linearly with the increase of the customer's social status. Therefore, H1 can only be confirmed for purchase intention and anticipated brand loyalty. In the luxury brand context, social distance showed positive effects on all dependent variables. Whereas social closeness here resulted in lower values. The socially distant conditions showed beneficial effects on the dependent variables. Therefore, H2 can be fully confirmed.

Discussion and conclusion

Social status distance between customers and service employees affects consumer variables in dependence of the brand context. As our results show, in a non-luxury brand context, social distance between the customer and the service employee harms customer-related behavior outcomes. For the customer's purchase intention and his anticipated brand loyalty, the data show that feeling socially distant (status inferior or status superior) harms these outcomes. Feeling socially close respectively equal to the service employee here shows the best results. For the customer's gifting intention, willingness to buy and his positive word-of-mouth, the behaviors increase linearly with the customer's social status. In a luxury sales context, social distance does not harm but rather support customer-related behavioral outcomes, such as purchase intention, anticipated brand loyalty, gifting intentions, willingness to buy and positive word-of-mouth. Feeling socially distant to the customer (being status superior or status inferior), customers in the luxury brand context show beneficial shopping intentions and evaluations towards the luxury brand. Feeling socially equal to the service employee in a luxury brand context rather harms than helps the sales.

These findings are counterintuitive to what previous sales literature suggested and, therefore, show new perspectives on the management of customer relationships in luxury retail. Therefore, the pursuit should not be to completely avoid social distance between affluent customers and their service counterparts in store, but rather to strategically manage social distance in luxury retail. Luxury customers strive for status acknowledgment and the feeling of positioning themselves in a social hierarchy through luxury consumption. The luxury

service employee can support that striving for status by emphasizing the status-relevant attributes of the luxury product or service.

Nevertheless, further research is asked to go deeper into this field by questioning what antecedents and characteristic of luxury brands are responsible for this effect and how, under right conditions, social distance can be turned into beneficial outcomes for luxury brands. Moreover, mediators and moderators will support the key findings of these first experiments. Mediators will help to explain, why social distance exactly supports luxury-beneficial brand outcomes and what is inside the black box of the luxury customer's mind to actually appreciate a certain level of social distance. Moderators will help understanding under what conditions of the customer or the environment the beneficial effects of social distance can be enhanced. Moreover, next steps in proceeding this stream of research should consider using real brands instead of fictive brands. This might help to make the scenario appear more realistic for the participants. An income filter for the customers or a special panel with only luxury knowledgeable participants might also support the data, focusing more on the "real" and representative luxury customer.

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Appendix

Table 1 - Measurement Scales

Construct	Items	Scale	Source(s)
DV Purchase intention	(a) I will visit the brand again. (b) I will watch out for new collections of the brand in the future. (c) I will consider buying a wristwatch from the brand in the future.	(1) very unlikely … (7) very likely	(Voorhees et al., 2006; Zeithaml et al., 1996)
DV Anticipated brand loyalty	"I could imagine buying a wristwatch from (the brand) in the future, even if competitive brands offer cheaper prices."	(1) not at all … (7) very much	Authors
DV Willingness to pay	(a) If I were going to purchase a watch, I would consider buying a wristwatch of this watch brand. (b) My willingness to buy a wristwatch of this watch brand would be high if I were shopping for a watch. (c) The probability I would consider buying a wristwatch of this watch brand is high.	(1) strongly agree … (7) strongly disagree	(Macintosh & Lockshin, 1997)
DV Positive word-of-mouth	(a) To what extent is it likely that you will say positive things about the company to others in person? (b) To what extent is it likely that you will encourage friends and relatives to buy watches from the brand in person? (c) To what extent is it likely that you will recommend the company to others in person?	(1) not at all … (7) very much	Brown et al., 2005

DV Gift purchasing intention	Imagine... you are given the possibility of choosing a beautiful present because you won a contest. How likely would you choose a watch from the brand just as seen at the jewelry store?	(1) very unlikely … (7) very likely	(Dubois & Paternault, 1995)
MC Similarity	(a) The service employee and I seem to have a lot in common. (b) The service employee and I seem to have similar personalities. (c) The service employee and I seem to have a similar social background. (d) The service employee and I seem to have similar fields of interest.	(1) strongly agree … (7) strongly disagree	(Tidwell & Eastwick, 2012)
MC Bipolar status differences	Comparing to the service employee in store, I perceived my social status as being... Please indicate how you perceived your social status in comparison to the service employee's social status.	(1) lower (2) equal (3) higher	Authors
MC Customer /Service employee status	(a) My social status as a customer is… How would you describe your personal social status as a customer? (b) The social status of the sales employee is… How would you describe the social status of the service employee?	(1) rather high … (7) rather low	Authors
MC Customer/Service employee rank	(a) On a social ladder, where the bottom rung equals a low social status and the top rungs equals a high social status, my own social status is... (b) On a social ladder, where the bottom rung equals a low social status and the top rungs equals a high social status, the service employee's social status is...	(1) bottom rung … (10) top rung	(Kraus et al., 2013)

MC Social distance	Which picture describes your feeling of closeness or distance the best? Please picture yourself and the service employee in store each as a circle (below).	(1) totally close … (7) totally distant	(Aron et al., 1992)